

# NEW FILMS

## Once Around

★ ★ 1/2

Oaks East Six

The star of *Once Around* is the screenplay by Malia Scotch Marmo. It's a nervy piece of work that manages to cover familiar terrain and make it seem new. Marmo's characters are unusual and occasionally obnoxious without ever seeming contrived.

That's obviously what brought together such a high-powered cast. Rich-

Renata rebounds quickly from this setback — right into the arms of Sam Sharpe (Dreyfuss). Sam is a flashy dresser who made a fortune selling time-share condominiums. He is unctuous, unpleasant and generally succeeds in making the nouveau riche seem like old money from the Hamptons.

But whatever the Bellas might think about Sam, one fact is clear: He loves Renata and she loves him. That's the only thing that keeps her family from going insane. When Sam meets them, he tries too hard to be friendly. When he gets to know them better, Sam makes the unpleasant mistake of relaxing and being himself. Inevitably, this means he will say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person.

Don't be misled. Sam is never rude or mean. Despite his annoying habit of turning on the salesman's charm, Sam genuinely likes these people and tries to fit in. It simply doesn't work.

What *Once Around* does best is capture the awkward moments of a family gathering. These events almost always involve a few touchy scenes that leave guests uncomfortable and family members embarrassed. Of course, with Sam around, these bits of unpleasantness become more and more frequent.

The story goes wrong when the gap Sam inadvertently creates between Renata and her family grows wider. People start to say that Sam is "tearing the family apart," and they break Renata's heart by pushing him away. But we never believe they should be taking such drastic measures.

Sam may be uncouth, but he values the

strength Renata draws from her family and never tries to disrupt those ties. There is a great difference between ill-mannered and divisive, and the screenplay by Marmo never shows Sam crossing that line.

*Once Around* also has some technical problems. Hunter and Laura San Giacomo — who plays her sister — both speak with an odd accent that fades in and out and has literally no resemblance to the way their parents or anyone else talks.

Also, a crucial scene between Renata

and Sam involves them looking at her pregnant belly. Obviously, Hunter isn't really about to have a baby. So instead of listening to their argument, we're looking at the stuffed pillow that almost — but not quite — makes her look as if she is eight months pregnant.

Despite its failings, *Once Around* does accomplish the difficult feat of being different. Marmo certainly has a distinctive voice. When she blends her off-beat characters with a believable storyline, the results should be terrific.

Michael Giltz



Universal Pictures

*Holly & Richie experience the joys & sorrows & passion that make life worth living.*

ard Dreyfuss, Holly Hunter, Danny Aiello and Gena Rowlands all have significant, well-written roles.

Hunter plays Renata Bella, a woman who loves the safe environment of her large Italian family. When a boyfriend breaks off an engagement, it's no surprise to see Renata run home to Mom and Pop. She even climbs into their bed in the middle of the night, just like a little kid.



Universal Studios

APPLAUSE wishes it could find romance the way Richard Dreyfuss and Holly Hunter did in "Once Around." Whew! What a kiss!